

Chapter 6

KNIGHT

Cato was invited to join Grandmaster Amon at the teahouse near Ember Falls. The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon as he climbed the eight hundred and eighty-eight steps to the top, and was reminded why the three waterfalls were collectively called Ember Falls. The vapor above the cascading curtains radiated a brilliant orange in the setting sunlight, making it seem like huge tongues of flame were licking an ever-darkening sky.

When he finally entered the teahouse, he was staring at the back of the white-haired sage. The old man was sitting on folded legs and facing the violent waterfalls with his eyes closed. Cato quietly slid the door shut, knelt down at the entrance, and waited patiently until his presence was acknowledged. He knew better than to disturb his master's meditation. The roaring monotony of the crashing water was oddly hypnotic. So he, too, closed his eyes and freely let his mind wander off without any guidance.

Hours must have already passed when he opened his eyes again. The sun had gone under and the waterfalls were no more than three silvery streaks on a black canvas. His master still sat in the exact same position, but somehow, the four lanterns hanging from the upper corners of the teahouse were all lit.

“A drop of water
Joins the river as one
Unstoppable force”

After reciting his poem, Grandmaster Amon patted on the floor and invited Cato to take a seat beside him. Poetry was a pastime that helped him clear his mind and to focus on the matters at hand. He had attempted to persuade his young pupil many times before to surrender his mind to poetry, but Cato always declined and promised that he would conjure a poem once he had found the wisdom to convert his feelings into words.

“What did you dream of?” Amon asked when Cato sat down beside him.

Cato frowned and stared at his master with puzzled eyes.

Amon laughed. “We all dream, my boy. After all, we are children of Onyra; the land of dreamers. Also, you were snoring.”

Cato didn't change his expression, but his eyes trailed off to the side. “I dreamed of darkness,” he said after a moment of silence, though he wasn't really sure what he even meant by it.

“Oh? That sounds rather ominous.”

Cato withdrew into his mind and finished his thought with a smile. “It was quite comforting, actually.”

Amon wrapped his arm around Cato's shoulder and gave his pupil a tight squeeze. “Well, if that's the way your river flows, then that's the way your river flows. There is no use trying to swim against the current.”

Cato didn't fully grasp his master's meaning, but nodded along all the same. “Yes, Master.”

Amon turned to the table and poured a cup of chrysanthemum tea for himself and his pupil. Cato offered to take over the pouring as a sign of courtesy, but the grandmaster politely refused the gesture with a wave of his hand.

“You have done well at the academy, my boy. Exceptionally well, I even hear.”

Cato lowered his head to hide his delight. “Thank you, Master.”

“When you first arrived at the Cat all those years ago, you were still a diamond in the rough, and look how brightly you now shine.” Amon handed one of the cups to Cato and held the other one below his nose to sniff up the fragrance.

Cato accepted the cup with a blank stare. He agreed that he had improved in leaps and bounds during his time at the academy, but didn't feel like a gemstone of any kind at all.

“Do you still remember what I told you back then?”

"Of course, Master. Every word."

Amon took a small sip of his tea despite it still being scorching hot. "I said that you would be under my care until you came of age."

Cato remembered that all too well. He had dreaded turning eighteen for such a long time, and now that the moment had finally arrived, he was every bit as nervous as he thought he would be.

"What will you do now that you are a man of your own?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't say sorry unless you have something to apologize for." Amon put down his cup and took Cato by the shoulders. "It's a simple question, my boy. You are free to do as you please. What would you like to do with your life? Who would you like to be?"

"I—" The questions might have been simple, but Cato never had the luxury to decide his own future before. "I don't know," he said quietly and lowered his eyes to the floor. "I always assumed I would be taken into the service of one of the noble Houses."

Amon released his pupil with a sigh and reached for his cup again. He took a sip and immediately refilled the cup to the edge. "Is that the life you want?"

Cato couldn't get the word 'no' to leave his lips. Of course he didn't want to be a servant, but had already accepted his role in life the moment he left Knightsong Haven. He put his cup of untouched tea on the table and laid his head on the wooden floorboards. "It is impossible to repay all that you've done for me, Master. I am forever in your debt and will gladly serve you until the end of time if that is what it takes to show you my gratitude. My life is yours to decide." He raised his head and showed his master a determined look. "I wish to serve House Everlong."

Amon blew the steam from his cup, but refrained from taking a sip. He turned around to stare at the darkened waterfall. "It's astonishing, isn't it?" He took a moment and simply listened to the seemingly never-ending cascade with his eyes closed. "I have always found Ember Falls to be the most beautiful *and* most frightening at night. Such tremendous force."

Cato followed his master's gaze into the darkness but chose to remain silent. There was nothing left to say. He was at peace with the decision he made and truly meant every word he said. Grandmaster Amon, Principal Aeron; he owed everything to them. Serving the Everlong clan was the only path that made sense to him.

"No," Amon finally said and took a sip of his tea.

Cato flinched with equal parts of shock and disappointment. He wasn't prepared to be rejected.

"No," Amon repeated matter-of-factly. "I will not accept you as my servant. The next chapter of your life is about to begin and I wish to be the one reading it, not writing it. Besides, you were not born to serve, my boy. We both know that you are far too stubborn." He shifted his eyes to Cato and smiled. "No matter what you may presume; you are not, nor will you ever be indebted to me. Never forget that."

"Master, I—" Cato was at a loss for words. The pellucid lake that was his future turned murky all of the sudden. If not serving the Everlongs, then what? "I don't understand."

"You can speak to me without restraint, Cato. What do you desire? What is it that you truly want?"

Cato's eyes sank to the floor again. For a minute, nothing could be heard except for the endless supply of water crashing down into the lake, some four hundred feet below. "My whole life I have only seen the orphanage and the academy." He paused and chewed his lip. "I wish to see the world."

Amon laughed, seemingly pleased with Cato's answer. "That's settled then."

"Master?"

"While I don't want you to serve me, I do wish to bind you to Onyra. Our nation is in need of someone with your talents."

Cato placed his forehead on the wooden floorboard. "Anything, Master. What will you have me do?"

"I want you to become an extension of my voice as an emissary of Onyra, and maintain relations with the other nations of Aedin."

Cato was overcome with joy upon hearing that. He was rooted to the floor and never even thought of getting up again. His mind was scattered all over the place. It took all his effort to hold on to his composure. "Of course, Master. I will represent Onyra to the best of my abilities. I will not disappoint you."

"I don't think you ever could, my boy." Amon held his eyes on his young pupil. He was beaming with pride and even seemed to have become sentimental. He drank his tea and put the empty cup on the table.

Cato immediately reached for the pot and dutifully filled his master's cup. Even with the adrenaline coursing through his veins, his hands were remarkably steady. It was a clear sign of his composure and swordsmanship.

Amon thanked his pupil with a courteous nod, but then adopted a serious look on his face. "Despite your talents and acumen, the noble lords and ladies of the realm would never listen to the words of some nameless orphan. How are you able to become an extension of my voice if you are a mute?"

Cato froze for a second. The teapot in his hands was shaking as he set it on the table. Even if it felt like an ice-cold dagger to his heart, he knew there was truth in his master's words. Without any land or title, he was but a lowborn without status. Despite being an alumnus of Aethelwomb, his voice would still be unheard. A noble ear only listened to a noble tongue; he learned that much from his time at the academy. "I understand, Master." He did his best not to sound too disappointed, but the fragility of his voice betrayed his emotions.

Amon grunted while stroking his beard with his eyes closed. "And what exactly is it that you understand?"

Cato took a deep breath in a failed attempt to rekindle his composure. "That a hammer will never be a chisel. That I can never hope to represent you in the noble courts." Saying it out loud was the final twist of the dagger in his heart.

"Why are you always so hard on yourself, my boy?" Amon sighed and shook his head. "Your thoughts are driven by obstacles while you should think in solutions instead. Once you do that, everything becomes possible. So, tell me, what would be the solution to our little conundrum?"

Cato shrugged. He knew the answer, of course he did. But growing up in an orphanage had taught him that it was dangerous to have too much hope. Even if Knightsong Haven seemed like a long-forgotten dream, it didn't change the fact that he was still Cato of Moonshield.

"Hope is a strange thing, isn't it?" Amon said, as if having read Cato's mind. "It is agony until it becomes reality." He put his hands on his pupil's shoulders and held them there until Cato finally found enough courage to meet his eyes. "I want to make you a lord of Onyra."

Cato was stunned. He had fantasized about this moment many times before, but nothing could have prepared him for the actual reality. His thoughts were completely scrambled. "Master, I—" He lowered his head to the wooden floorboards again. "You have done so much for me already. I can't possibly accept such generosity."

Amon chuckled and softly patted his pupil on the head a few times. "But you have no trouble refusing my generosity."

If Cato could sink his head even lower, he would have done so in a heartbeat. Refusing a gift was considered to be a grave insult among the elite, never mind a gift of such magnitude. A drop of cold sweat slid down from his eyebrow. "My apologies, Master. I meant you no disrespect."

"Then you will accept?"

It remained silent for a while. Cato was starting to feel nauseous and fought with all his might against the overwhelming urge to vomit. Sweat poured down from his face and every particle of his body screamed at him to accept the offer. It remained silent for a while longer. His entire world seemed to tremble. "Yes," he finally managed to say. It sounded like the final whisper of a dying man. He never knew it could be so exhausting to utter a single word, but felt liberated having it finally said out loud. 'Yes', the most beautiful word to start off his next chapter with.

"Good. You will be made the lord of Serenity Hills."

Cato raised his head and frowned. "The Seraphine lands? What of Master Nia?"

Amon sighed. He grabbed Cato's cup, flung the untouched content over the railings, and proceeded to fill it with a fresh batch of tea. "Master Nia made the suggestion herself," he said and motioned his pupil to take the steaming cup. "Serenity Hills has remained unattended ever since her parents and brothers were taken by the war. She can't bring herself to visit it even after all these years. Some scars only become more visible over time."

"But why would she suggest granting Serenity Hills to me?" It felt surreal saying it out loud.

"She, too, has been following your progress at the academy with great interest. She knows what you're capable of and has taken a great liking to you. In the end, she only wants a suitable caretaker of her ancestral lands, and I'm sure her son has put in a good word for you as well."

"Marcus?" Cato winced. "We have a complicated relationship."

Amon laughed. "Rivalry is just a friendship in disguise. I suggest you cherish it."

Cato nodded and finally took a sip of his tea. It was bitter, but had a sweet aftertaste. "I will do my utmost best to live up to their expectations."

"I know you will." Amon stood up and stretched his back. "Your clan will need a name and banner."

"Knight," Cato answered instantly, as if having waited all his life to say it out loud. It was his tribute to the only place that had ever felt like home to him. His face reddened as he awaited his master's reaction.

"Knight," Amon repeated and stroked his beard with his eyes closed. "Simple, but strong. It is a good name."

Cato's lips twitched into a careful smile. He wondered what Matron Teia would say if she could see the person he had become. His smile promptly gained fidelity.

"Come," Amon said and extended his hand in an invitation to join him. "Rise and stand before me as my equal, Lord Cato; patriarch of the Knight clan, ruler of Serenity Hills, and son of Onyra."

Cato stared at his master's hand for a moment before he accepted the invitation. Everything felt like a dream he hoped to never wake up from.